

The slope beyond our base camp and of these hanging glaciers is very steep. Because of such steepness of the south facing wall of rock, we observed that any attempt on Nilkantha, Parbati Parbat and other 19 thousanders would be very difficult from the southern flank.

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Photos 45-46

AN UNCLIMBED MOUNTAIN?

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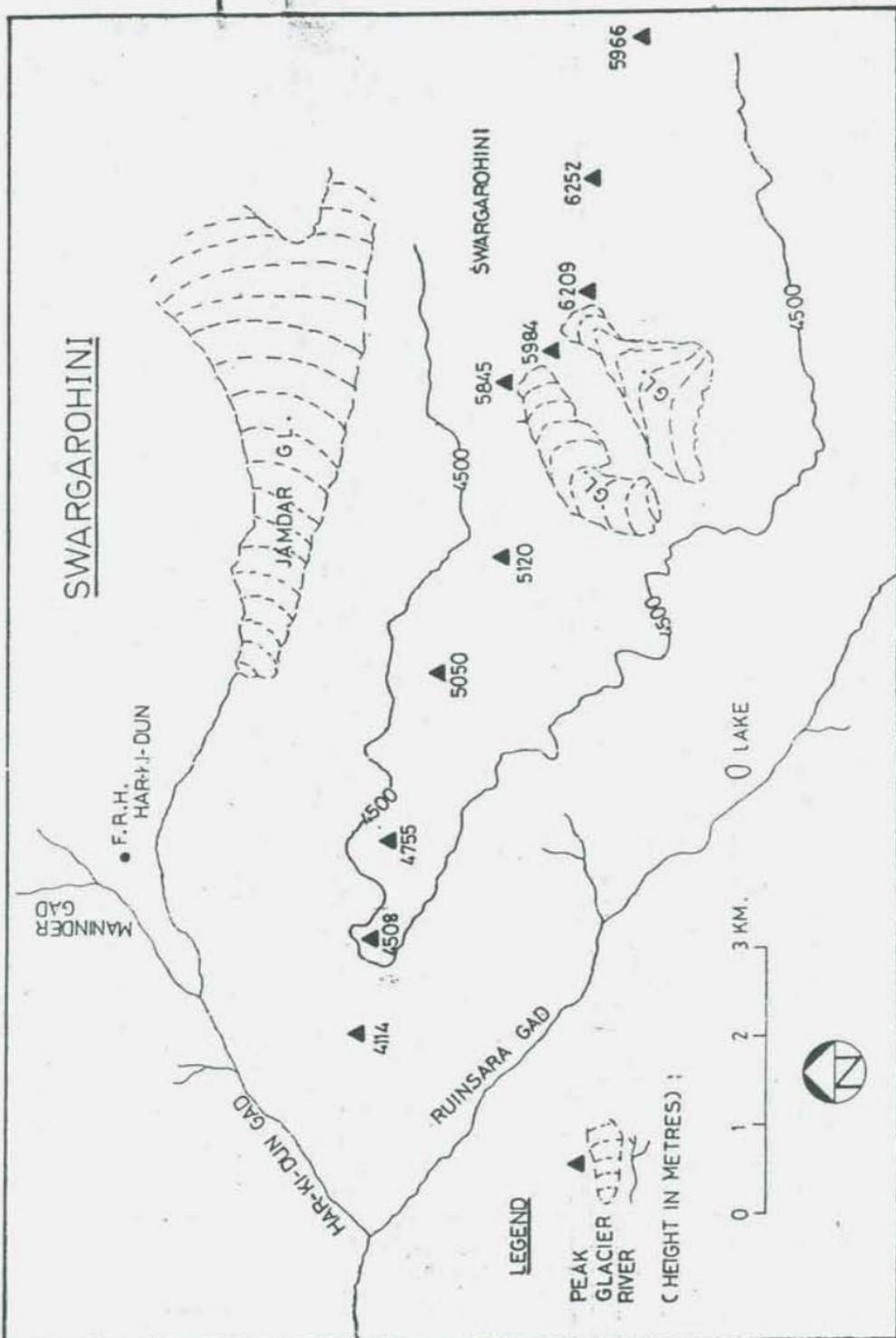
IT WAS once my ambition to make, possibly, a first ascent of 'The Path to Heaven', for that is a translation of Swargarohini, the mountain I wanted to climb.

I say 'possibly' because, by tradition, it was up this mountain that Draupadi, the Pandavas and their dog left the earth.

Swargarohini is 20,512 ft or 6252 m high. Without a pocket calculator I am too lazy to check whether these heights are the same. The first is taken from a 1925 map in which the mountain is called Surgnalin, and the later from a map published, also by the Survey of India, in 1963.

My first view of the mountain was in 1948, on a descent to the Harki Dun from the Borasu pass. I had heard of the beauty of the Harki Dun and would have visited it earlier had it not been for the war. I have a painting of Swargarohini made there in 1885 by William Harris and sent to his half-sister, Eily Quarry (née Hume) who gave it to me after my visit to the Harki Dun. The breath-taking view of the mountain from there has altered little in a hundred years except that the blue pine are now higher and you see the mountain through the trees, instead of rising about them as in the painting.

Swargarohini, as far as I can judge, is an extensive hump with several rock peaks rising from it. The length of the hump, about 7 kilometres, runs roughly WNW to ESE with narrow rock ridges descending from its ends in a series of pinnacles. The breadth is about 2 km and on my 1963 map peaks at 5845, 5984, 6209, and 6252 m are marked rising from it. The ridge leading up to the hump from the west has peaks at 4508, 4755, 5050 and 5120 m, and down from the hump to the east there are more peaks the highest of which is 5966 m. The northern and southern faces of the hump are great walls with ridges separated by gullies running down them, and two glaciers each 2 km long on the southern side. The remains of morainic deposits



from one of these holds up a lake above the Ruinsara gad in an ablation valley: a splendid place for a base camp at nearly 3500 m. All the peaks rising from the hump would make good climbs, and when, some years ago, I showed Chris Bonington a photograph of the northern side he said it was a climb he would like to do.

I was so excited by what I saw in 1948 that climbed on to the western ridge at about 15,500 ft before breakfast: some 3000 ft or more by 9 a.m. and from there had my first view from the northwest of the Black Peak as John Martyn and I had called it in 1937 when we had seen its great black rock precipice from the Bandarpunch south ridge. Its official name is now Kalanag. From the northwest it was a different mountain: what modern climbers rudely call a cow — a great snow ridge above glaciers. It is slightly higher than Swargarohini and more of my standard of climbing, so I decided that it must be my next expedition and that, if possible, I would ski down it.

However, in 1958 I took an expedition of seven Mayo College boys; two New Zealanders, Allan Berry and Alby Clough who were teaching at the College; Shiv Ganju and H. L. Dutt; and Dr Moor from England, to see whether we could get up Swargarohini. We camped beside the lake in the Ruinsara valley. We had not been able to afford Sherpas, and the local porters, giving us to understand that they thought the climb was sacrilege, refused to join us on the mountain. We all carried to a camp at 14,400 ft where we left the New Zealanders, Dr Moor, and D. N. Mathur, one of the boys, to attempt the mountain. The next day, 21 May, skiing the other side of our valley, we watched avalanches pouring off Swargarohini and hoped the climbers were safe. Mahendra, another boy, and I, with two porters whose material interests were stronger than their spiritual doubts, climbed to the 14,400 ft camp the following morning and saw the high party coming down what we called Scimitar Ridge. We wondered if they had been successful, but as they did not turn up that evening, we supposed not.

The next day we set out at 06.30 a.m. carrying loads of about 35 lb each, in time to see the others making their way again up Scimitar Ridge. At about noon we saw them coming down again. We were at 17,000 ft on very steep snow whose condition I did not like, so we turned back too. Without rock pitons, they had been defeated by a rock gendarme at over 19,000 ft.

As far as I know, the next and, so far the only other attempt on Swargarohini was made in 1974 by a party of Canadians, Dilsher Virk who had climbed in the area while at the Doon School, and Dr Charles Clarke. They made a first ascent of what I think was the 6209 peak, which was the one we had thought to be the highest in 1958. From their account in the Canadian Alpine Journal of 1975 it seems to me that they did not realize, as we had not, that there was a peak only 43 metres higher 1.4 km along the ridge to the east.

So, unless I am wrong, and unless the Pandavas reached it with their dog, the summit of this splendid mountain is still to be climbed.

There are also other exciting peaks and endless routes to be explored, all at heights where climbing can be enjoyed, and within the inner line in an area noted for its birds, animals and flowers, and admirable for glaciological studies.

Photos 47 to 51, 53 ←